The BRONZE BELL

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

AUTHOR OF "THE BRASS BOWL," ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

COPYRIGHT BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

SYNOPSIS.

David Amber, starting for a duck-shooting visit with his friend, Quain, comes upon a young lady equestrian who has been dismounted by her horse becoming frightened at the sudden appearance in the road of a party Hindu. He declares he is Bahari Lal Chatterji, "the appointed functionaire of The Bell," addresses Amber as a man of high rank and presents a mysterious little bronze box, "The Token," into his hand, disappears in the wood. The girl calls Amber by name. He in turn addresses her as Miss Sophia Farrell, daughter of Col. Farrell of the British diplomatic service in India and visiting the Quains. Several nights later the Quain home is burglarized and the bronze box stolen. Amber and Quain go hunting on an island and become lost and Amber is left marooned.

CHAPTER III. (Continued).

He had, then, these alternatives: he might either compose himself to hug the leeward side of a dune till daybreak (or till relief should come) or else undertake a five-mile tramp on the desperate hope of finding at the end of it the tide out and the sandbar a safe footway from shore to shore. Between the two he vacillated not at all; anything were preferable to a night in the dunes, beaten by the implacable storm, haunted by the thought of Quain; and even though he were to find the eastern causeway under water, at least the exercise would have served to keep him from freezing.

Ten minutes after his last cartridge had been fruitlessly discharged, he set out for the ocean beach, pausing at the first dune he came upon to scrape a shallow trench in the sand and cache therein both guns and his game-bag. Marking the spot with a bit of driftwood stuck upright, he pressed on, eventually pausing on the overhanging lip of a 20-foot bluff. To its foot the beach below was aswirl knee-deep with wash of breakers.

Awed and disappointed, Amber drew back. The beach was impassable; here was no wide and easy road to the east, such as he had thought to find; to gain the sandbar he had now to thread a tortuous and uncertain way through the bewildering dunes.

A demon of anxiety prodded him on: he must learn Quain's fate, or go mad. Once on the mainland it were a matter of facility to find his way to the village of Shampton, telephone Tanglewood and charter a "team" to convey him thither. He shut his teeth on his determination and set his face to the east.

Beset and roughly buffeted by the gale; the snow settling in rippling drifts in the folds of his clothing and upon his shoulders clinging like a cloth; his face cut by clouds of sand flung horizontally with well-nigh the force of birdshot from a gun: he bowed to the blast and plodded steadily on.

Imperceptibly fatigue benumbed his senses, blunted the keen edge of his emotions; even the care for Quain became a mere dull ache in the back of his perceptions; of physical suffering he was unconscious. He fell a prey to freakish fancies. For a long time he moved on in stupid, wondering contemplation of a shining crescent of sand backed by a green, steaming wall of jungle. Many visions formed and dissolved in dream-like phantasmagoria; but of them all the strongest and most recurrent was that of the girl in the black riding-habit, walking by his side down the aisle of trees. So that presently the tired and overwrought man believed himself talking with her, reasoning, arguing, pleading desperately for his heart's desire; . . . and wakened with a start, to hear the echo of her voice as though she had spoken but the instant gone, to find his own lips framing the syllables of her name—"Sophia!"

Abruptly he regained consciousness of his plight, and with an effort shook his senses back into his head. It was not precisely a time when he could afford to let his wits go woolgathering. Inflexible of purpose in the face of all his weariness and discouragement, he was on the point of resuming his march when he was struck by the circumstance that the whitened shoulder of a dune, quite near at hand, should seem as if frosted with light—coldly luminous.

Staring, speculative, he hung in the wind—inquisitive as a cat but loath to waste time in footless inquiry. The snow-fall, setting in with augmented violence, decided him. Where light was, there should be man, and where man, shelter.

His third eager stride opened up a wide basin in the dunes, filled with eddying veils of snow, and set, at some distance, with two brilliant squares of light—windows in an invisible dwelling. In the space between them, doubtless, there would be a door. But a second time he paused, remembering that the island was said to be uninhabited. Only yesterday he had asked and been so informed. . . . Odd!

So passing strange he held it, indeed, that he was conscious of a singular reluctance to question the phenomenon. He had positively to force himself on to seek the door, and even when he had stumbled against its step he twice lifted his hand and let it fall without knocking.

There was not a sound within that he could hear above the clamour of the rabid night.

In the end, however, he knocked stoutly enough.

CHAPTER IV.

The Man Perdu.

A shadow swept swiftly across one of the windows, and the stranger at the door was aware of a slight jarring, as though some more than ordinarily brutal gust of wind had shaken the house upon its foundation, or an inner door had been slammed violently. But otherwise he had so little evidence that his summons had fallen on aught but empty walls or deaf ears that he had begun to debate his right to enter without permission, when a chain rattled, a bolt grated, and the door swung wide. A flood of radiance together with a gust of heated air struck him in the face. Dazzled, he reeled across the threshold.

Three paces within the room, Amber paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust themselves to the light. Vaguely conscious of a presence behind him, he faced another—the slight, spare silhouette of a man's figure between him and the lamp; and at the same time felt that he was being subjected to a close scrutiny—both searching and, at its outset, the reverse of hospitable. But he had no more than become sensitive to this than the man before stepped quickly forward and with two strong hands clasped his shoulders.

"David Amber!" he heard his name pronounced in a voice singularly resonant and pleasant. "So you've run me to earth at last!"

Amber's face was blank with incredulity as he recognized the speaker. "Rutton!" he stammered. "Rutton—why—by all that's strange!"

"Guilty," said the other with a quiet laugh. "But sit down." He swung Amber about, gently guiding him to a chair. "You look pretty well done up. How long have you been out in this infernal night? But never mind answering; I can wait. Doggott!"

"Yes, sir."

"Take Mr. Amber's coat and boots and bring him my dressing-gown and slippers."

"Yes, sir."

"And a hot toddy and something to eat—and be quick about it."

"Very good, sir."

Rutton's body-servant moved noiselessly to Amber's side, deftly helping him remove his shooting jacket, whereon snow had caked in thin and brittle sheets. His eyes, grey and shallow, flickered recognition and softened, but he did not speak in anticipation of Amber's kindly "Good evening, Doggott." To which he responded quietly: "Good evening, Mr. Amber. It's a pleasure to see you again. I trust you are well."

"Quite, thank you. And you?"

"I'm very fit, thank you, sir."

"And"—Amber sat down again, Doggott kneeling at his feet to unlace and remove his heavy pigskin hunting boots—"and your brother?"

For a moment the man did not answer. His head was lowered so that his features were invisible, but a dull, warm flush overspread his cheeks.

"And your brother, Doggott?"

"I'm sorry, sir, about that; but it was Mr Rutton's orders," muttered the man.

"You're talking of the day you met Doggott at Nokomis station?" interposed his employer from the stand he had taken at one side of the fireplace, his back to the broad hearth whereon blazed a grateful driftwood fire.

Amber looked up inquiringly, nodding an unspoken affirmative.

"It was my fault that he—er—prevaricated, I'm afraid; as he says, it was by my order."

Rutton's expression was masked by the shadows; Amber could make nothing of his curious reticence, and remained silent, waiting a further explanation. It came, presently, with an effect of embarrassment.

"I had—have peculiar reasons for not wishing my refuge here to be discovered. I told Doggott to be careful, should he meet any one we knew. Although, of course, neither of us anticipated . . ."

"I don't think Doggott was any more dumbfounded than I," said Amber. "I couldn't believe he'd left you, yet it seemed impossible that you should be here—of all place—in the neighborhood of Nokomis, I mean. As for that—" Amber shook his head expressively, glancing round the mean room in which he had found this man of such extraordinary qualities. "It's altogether inconceivable," he summed up his bewilderment.

"It does seem so—even to me, at times."

"Then why—in heaven's name—"

"I see I must tell you something—a little; as little as I can help—of the truth."

"I'm afraid you must; though I'm damned if I can detect a glimmer of either rhyme or reason in this preposterous situation."

"In three words," Rutton said deliberately: "I am hiding."

"Hiding!"

"Obviously."

Amber bent forward, studying the older man's face intently. Thin and dark—not tanned like Amber's, but with a native darkness of skin like that of the Spanish—it was strongly marked, its features at once prominent and finely modeled. The hair intensely black, the eyes as dark and of peculiar fire, the lips broad, full, and sympathetic, the cheekbones high, the forehead high and somewhat narrow: these combined to form a strangely striking ensemble, and none the less striking for its weird resemblance to Amber's own cast of countenance.

Indeed, their likeness one to the other was nothing less than weird in that it could be so superficially strong, yet elusive. No two men were ever more unalike than these save in this superficial accident of facial contours and complexion. No one knowing Amber (let us say) could ever have mistaken him for Rutton; and yet any one, strange to both, armed with a description of Rutton, might pardonably have believed Amber to be his man. Yet manifestly they were products of alien races, even of different climes—their individualities as dissimilar as the poles.

"Hiding!" Amber reiterated in a tone scarcely louder than a whisper.

"And you have found me out, my friend."

"But—but I don't—"

Rutton lifted a hand in deprecation; and as he did so the door in the rear of the room opened and Doggott entered. Cat-like, passing behind Amber, he placed upon the table a small tray, and from a steaming pitcher poured him a glass of hot spiced wine. At a look from his employer he filled a second.

Amber lifted his fragrant glass. "You're joining me, Rutton?"

"With all my heart!" The man came forward to his glass. "For old sake's sake, David. Shall we drink a toast?" He hesitated, with a marked air of embarrassment, then impulsively swung his glass aloft. "Drink standing!" he cried, his voice oddly vibrant. And Amber rose. "To the king—the king, God bless him!"

"To the king!" It was more an exclamation of surprise than an echo to the toast; nevertheless Amber drained his drink to the final drop. As he resumed his seat, the room rang with the crash of splintering glass; Rutton had dashed his tumbler to atoms on the hearthstone.

"Well!" commented Amber, lifting his brows questioningly. "You are sincere, Rutton. But who in blazes would ever have suspected you of being a British subject?"

"Why not?"

"But it seems to me I should have known—"

"What have you ever really known about me, David, save that I am myself?"

"Well—when you put it that way—little enough — nothing." Amber laughed nervously, disconcerted. "But, seriously now, this foolish talk about hiding is all a joke, isn't it?"

"No," said Rutton soberly; "no, it's no joke." He sighed profoundly. "As for my recent whereabouts, I have been—ah—traveling considerably; moving about from pillar to post." To this the man added a single word, the more significant in that it embodied the nearest approach to a confidence that Amber had ever known him to make: "Hunted."

"Hunted by whom?"

"I beg your pardon." Rutton bent forward and pushed the cigarettes to Amber's elbow. "I am—ah—so preoccupied with my own mean troubles, David, that I had forgotten that you had nothing to smoke. Forgive me."

"That's a matter, I—"

Amber cut short his impatient catechism in deference to the other's mute plea. And Rutton thanked him with a glance—one of those looks which, between friends, are more eloquent than words. Sighing, he shook his head, his eyes once more seeking the flames. And silently studying his face—the play of light from lamp and hearth throwing its features into salient relief—for the first time Amber, his wits warmed back to activity from the stupor the bitter cold had put upon them, noticed how time and care had worn upon the man since they had last parted. He had never suspected Rutton to be his senior by more years than ten, at the most; tonight, however, he might well be taken for fifty. Impulsively the younger man sat up and put a hand upon the arm of Rutton's chair. "What can I do?" he asked simply.

Rutton roused, returning his regard with a smile slow, charming, infinitely sad. "Nothing," he replied; "absolutely nothing."

"But surely—!"

"No man can do for me what I cannot do for myself. When the time comes"—he lifted his shoulders lightly—"I will do what I can. Till then . . ." He diverged at a tangent. "After all, the world is quite as tiny as the worn-out aphorism has it. To think that you should find me here! It's less than a week since Doggott and I hit upon this place and settled down, quite convinced we had, at last, lost ourselves . . . and might have peace, for a little space at least! And now," concluded Rutton, "we have to move on."

"Because I've found you here?"

"Because you have found me."

"I don't understand."

"My dear boy, I never meant you should."

"But if you're in any danger—"

"I am not."

"You're not! But you just said—"

"I'm in no danger whatever; humanity is, if I'm found."

"I don't follow you at all."

Again Rutton smiled wearily. "I didn't expect you to, David. But this misadventure makes it necessary that I should tell you something; you must be made to believe in me. I beg you to; I'm neither mad nor making game of you." There was no questioning the sane sincerity of the man. He continued slowly. "It's a simple fact, incredible but absolute, that, were my whereabouts to be made public, a great, a staggering blow would be struck against the peace and security of the world. . . . Don't laugh, David; I mean it."

"I'm not laughing, Rutton; but you must know that's a pretty large order. Most men would—"

"Call me mad. Yes, I know," Rutton took up his words as Amber paused, confused. "I can't expect you to understand me: you couldn't unless I were to tell you what I may not. But you know me—better, perhaps, than any living man save Doggott . . . and one other. You know whether or not I would seek to delude you, David. And knowing that I could not, you know why it seems to me imperative that, this hole being discovered, Doggott and I must betake ourselves elsewhere. Surely there must be solitudes—!" He rose with a gesture of impatience and began restlessly to move to and fro.

Amber started suddenly, flushing. "If you mean—"

Rutton's kindly hand forced him back into his chair. "Sit down, David. I never meant that—never for an instant dreamed you'd intentionally betray my secret. It's enough that you should know it, should occasionally think of me as being here, so bring misfortune down upon me, to work an incalculable disaster to the progress of this civilization of ours."

"You mean," Amber asked uncertainly, "thought transference?"

"Something of the sort—yes." The man came to a pause beside Amber, looking down almost pitifully into his face. "I daresay all this sounds hopelessly melodramatic and neurotic and tommyrotic, David, but . . . I can tell you nothing more. I'm sorry."

"But only let me help you—any way in my power, Rutton. There's nothing I'd not do. . . ."

"I know, David, I know it. But my case is beyond human aid, since I am powerless to apply a remedy myself."

"And you are powerless?"

Rutton was silent a long moment. Then, "Time will tell," he said quietly. "There is one way . . ." He resumed his monotonous round of the room.

Mechanically Amber began to smoke, trying hard to think, to penetrate by reasoning or intuition the wall of mystery which, it seemed, Rutton chose to set between himself and the world.

Rutton Turned to the Fire, His Head Drooping Despondently.

Presently he grew conscious that Rutton was standing as if listening, his eyes averted to the windows.

"What is it?" he inquired at length, unable longer to endure the tensity of the pause.

"Nothing. I beg your pardon, David." Rutton returned to his chair, making a visible effort to shake off his preoccupation. "It's an ugly night, out there. Lucky you blundered on this place. Tell me how it happened. What became of the other man—your friend?"

The thought of Quain stabbed Amber's consciousness with a mental pang as keen as acute physical anguish. He jumped up in torment. "God!" he cried chokingly. "I'd forgotten! He's out there on the bay, poor devil!—freezing to death if not drowned. Our boat went adrift somehow; Quain would insist on going after her in a leaky old skiff we found on the shore . . . and didn't come back. I waited till it was hopeless, then concluded I'd make a try to cross to Shampton by way of the tidal bar. And I must!"

"It's impossible," Rutton told him with grave sympathy.

"But I must; think of his wife and children, Rutton! There's a chance yet—a bare chance; he may have reached the boat. If he did, every minute I waste here is killing him by inches; he'll die of exposure! But from Shampton we could send a boat—"

"The tide falls about midnight to night," interrupted Rutton, consulting his watch. "It's after nine—and there's a heavy surf breaking over the bar now. By ten it'll be impassable, and you couldn't reach it before 11. Be content, David; you're powerless."

"You're right—I know that," groaned Amber, his head in his hands. "I was afraid it was hopeless, but—but—"

"I know, dear boy, I know!"

With a gesture of despair Amber resumed his seat. For some time he remained deep sunk in dejection. At length, mastering his emotion, he looked up. "How did you know about Quain—that we were together?" he asked.

"Doggott saw you land this morning, and I've been watching you all day with my field-glasses, prepared to take cover the minute you turned my way. Don't be angry with me, David; it wasn't that I didn't yearn to see you face to face again, but that . . . I didn't dare."

"Oh, that!" exclaimed Amber with an exasperated fling of his hand. "Between the two of you—you and Quain—you'll drive me mad with worry."

"I'm sorry, David. I only wish I might say more. It hurts a bit to have you doubt me."

"I don't doubt," Amber declared in desperation; "at least, I mean I won't if you'll be sensible and let me stand by and see you through this trouble—whatever it is."

Rutton turned to the fire, his head drooping despondently. "That may not be," he said heavily. "The greatest service you can do me is to forget my existence, now and henceforth, erase our friendship from the tablets of your memory, pass me as a stranger should our ways ever cross again." He flicked the stub of a cigarette into the flames. "Kismet! . . . I mean that, David, from my heart. Won't you do this for me—one last favor, old friend?"

Amber nodded.

"Then . . ." Rutton attempted to divert the subject. "I think you said Quain? Any relation to Quain's 'Aryan Invasion of India?'"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

In the End, However, He Knocked Stoutly Enough.

WOMAN ESCAPES OPERATION

Was Cured by Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound

Elwood, Ind.—"Your remedies have cured me and I have only taken six bottles of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. I was sick three months and could not walk. I suffered all the time. The doctors said I could not get well without an operation, for I could hardly stand the pains in my sides, especially my right one, and down my right leg. I began to feel better when I had taken only one bottle of Compound, but kept on as I was afraid to stop too soon."—Mrs. SADIE MULLEN, 2723 N. B. St., Elwood, Ind.

Why will women take chances with an operation or drag out a sickly, half-hearted existence, missing three-fourths of the joy of living, when they can find health in Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound?

For thirty years it has been the standard remedy for female ills, and has cured thousands of women who have been troubled with such ailments as displacements, inflammation, ulceration, fibroid tumors, irregularities, periodic pains, backache, indigestion, and nervous prostration.

If you have the slightest doubt that Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound will help you, write to Mrs. Pinkham at Lynn, Mass., for advice. Your letter will be absolutely confidential, and the advice free.

THEN THE AGENT FLED.

Insurance Agent—I'd like to write a policy on your life.

Mr. Brighton Early—Better not. I was born under a lucky star. If you'd insure me today it's ten to one I'd die tomorrow.

Practical Illustration.

To shorten a long Sunday afternoon for Fred, aged eight, his mother told him that he might illustrate the twenty-third Psalm in any way he chose. Quiet reigned for a time, as Fred, busy with pencil and pad, drew "shepherd" and "green pasture," "rod and staff." Then a silence ensued, followed by a noisy clatter which brought his mother to the room. Fred was busily arranging a train of cars, a toy gun, marbles, etc., on the table.

"What are you doing, Fred?"

"Why," he answered, "these are the presents of my enemies."

A HIT

What She Gained by Trying Again.

A failure at first makes us esteem final success.

A family in Minnesota that now enjoys Postum would never have known how good it is if the mother had been discouraged by the failure of her first attempt to prepare it. Her son tells the story:

"We had never used Postum till last spring when father brought home a package one evening just to try it. We had heard from our neighbors, and in fact every one who used it, how well they liked it.

"Well, the next morning Mother brewed it about five minutes, just as she had been in the habit of doing with coffee without paying special attention to the directions printed on the package. It looked weak and didn't have a very promising color, but nevertheless father raised his cup with an air of exceptancy. It certainly did give him a great surprise, but I'm afraid it wasn't a very pleasant one, for he put down his cup with a look of disgust.

Mother wasn't discouraged though, and next morning gave it another trial, letting it stand on the stove till boiling began and then letting it boil for fifteen or twenty minutes, and this time we were all so pleased with it that we have used it ever since.

"Father was a confirmed dyspeptic and a cup of coffee was to him like poison. So he never drinks it any more, but drinks Postum regularly. He isn't troubled with dyspepsia now and is actually growing fat, and I'm sure Postum is the cause of it. All the children are allowed to drink it and they are perfect pictures of health." Name given by Postum Co., Battle Creek, Mich.

Read the little book, "The Road to Wellville," in pkgs. "There's a reason."

Ever read the above letter? A new one appears from time to time. They are genuine, true, and full of human interest.

Ideals Always Important.

It is by believing in, loving and following illimitable ideals that a man grows great. Their very impossibility is their highest virtue. They live before us as the image of that which we are to grow for ever.—Stopford Brooke.

Height of Meanness.

"Our new neighbor must be a very suspicious character." "Why so?" "She employs a maid who is deaf and dumb, the mean thing!"